DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 082 543 FL 003 781

AUTHOR	van Ek, J. A.
TITLE	Analysis of the Problems Involved in Defining, in Operational Terms, a Basic Competence Level (or Threshold Level) in Foreign Language Learning by Adults.
INSTITUTION	Council of Europe, Strasbourg (France). Committee for Out-of-School Education and Cultural Development.
PUB DATE	31 Jan 72
NOTE	16p.; Paper presented at a conference, "Plan for a European Unit-Credit System in the Field of Adult Language Learning," Strasbourg, France, February 18, 1972
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Adult Education; *Language Instruction; Language Programs; *Language Skills; *Modern Languages; Second Language Learning; *Second Languages

ABSTRACT

This study discusses problems involved in an attempt to define the minimum level of foreign language competence. That level, defined as the "threshold level," is considered to be the lowest learning objective in the framework of a unit/credit system. The criteria suggested in this paper to determine the threshold level of linguistic competence in each of the basic language skills are then examined with reference to the development of adult language programs. (RL)

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

ED 082543

Strasbourg, 31 January 1972 CCC/EES (72) 17

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

COMMITTEE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL EDUCATION
AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Plan for a European unit-credit system
in the field of adult language learning

Strasbourg, 18 February 1972

ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN DEFINING, IN OPERATIONAL TERMS, A BASIC COMPETENCE LEVEL (OR THRESHOLD LEVEL) IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING BY ADULTS

by

Dr. J.A. van EK

FL 003781

24.935
04.3

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

1. Introduction

1.1 The concept of a unit/credit system in foreign language learning by adults was devised as a means to promote such language learning.

1.2 The promotion of learning is a purposeful activity aimed at the production of changes in the behaviour potential of the learner.

1.3 For the promotion of learning to be carried out effectively a clear insight into the nature of the desired changes is essential.

1.4 The gaining of such insight requires a clear view of the behaviour potential which will be expected after completion of the learning process (terminal behaviour potential).

1.5 In recognition of the existence of various degrees and types of linguistic proficiency the unit/credit system is designed as an overall framework which is to allow a learner to proceed in the most direct way through various stages towards the terminal behaviour that will satisfy his individual needs.

1.6 Consequently the unit/credit system is to be conceived as an integrated system of stages of linguistic proficiency.

1.7 A stage of linguistic proficiency is defined by the terminal behaviour which is evidence of completion of that stage.

1.8 Consequently, the unit/credit scheme is to be based on an integrated system of language learning objectives.

1.9 It is only after such a system has been set up that rational decisions can be made on measures to be taken to encourage or facilitate the progress of learners towards various learning objectives.

1.10 It follows from 1.9 that in the development of a unit/credit scheme, such matters as teaching methods, course-book design, media-combination, teacher-training, and the recognition of awards (credits, language-passport, etc.)are secondary to the definition of learning-objectives.

1.11 The initiation, stimulation and co-ordination of research into these "secondary matters" as well as the making of decisions on educational policy will greatly benefit from the existence of a well-integrated system of learning-objectives.

1.12 The present study discusses problems involved in an attempt to define a minimum-level of foreign language competence.

./.

1.13 This level, called threshold level, will be the lowest learning objective in the framework of a unit/credit system, in other words the level below which no further levels can be usefully distinguished.

1.14 In accordance with varied needs of language-learners the threshold level will have to be defined for each of four language-skills: oral compréhension- speaking - reading - writing.

1.15 It is tentatively proposed that each of the four skills up to threshold level may constitute the learning content of one unit, and that beginners will start on their way through the unit/credit system via one or more of these units (but cf. 2.11).

2. Units

2.1 There are at least two different ways, it would seem, in which units can be defined. They can be defined in terms of:

(a) specified elements of an instructional programme;

(b) specified levels and types of linguistic ability.

2.2 Specified elements of an instructional programme may be:

(a) micro-elements, such as (grammatically) the contrast past tense/present perfect, or (situationally) "buying theatre tickets";

(b) macro-elements, such as (grammatically) the verb-system, or (situationally) "going out".

2.3 If units are defined in accordance with 2.2 the unit/credit system will dictate to a greater (2.2a) or to a lesser (2.2b) extent the composition of language courses. This is because the units have to be hierarchically ordered, entrance into one unit presupposing completion of one or more other units.

2.4 Imposing a hierarchical ordering in terms of the "elements" of 2.2 would be unjustifiable in view of our lack of insight into language learning strategies, and it would conflict with several conclusions of the Rüschlikon Symposium, notably I.3 and the last paragraph of page 4.

2.5 It follows from 2.4 that units will have to be defined as indicated in 2.1b., that is, in terms of "specified levels and types of linguistic ability".

2.6 Levels and types of linguistic ability may be specified with reference to a cylindrical model "with a central core representing the development of a general language competence through different levels, and with specialised components radiating from this core at each level" (Rüschlikon Conclusions, I.8).

./.

2.7 If units are defined as indicated in 2.1b., the cylindrical model (2.6) may be divided into as many units as there are levels and types of linguistic ability that can be usefully distinguished.

2.8 A "useful distinction" (2.7) corresponds to a functional difference in linguistic behaviour potential. Thus "the ability to handle spatio-temporal relationship terms" cannot be looked upon as a "useful distinction" since by itself it does not correspond to a functional difference in linguistic behaviour potential. At least, it is hard to conceive of for instance a situation where an employer would prefer one applicant to another just because he possessed this ability and the other did not, other things being equal. "The ability to handle spatio-temporal relationship terms" may be regarded as an element, not a level of linguistic proficiency: the hypothetical employer would be unlikely ever to encounter two such applicants because a difference in this ability would inevitably be part of an overall difference in linguistic ability, except in the trivial case of two learners following the same course and one of them having done lesson 5 "prepositions of place and time" and the other only having come to the end of lesson 4. "Useful distinctions" are for instance "ability to take part in a face to face conversation" (two participants) as opposed to "ability to take part in a group discussion".

2.9 The criterion described in 2.8 is not sufficiently objective to preclude arbitrariness in the delimitation of units. Another weakness, inherent in the proposed definition of units in terms of 2.1b., is that the units will inevitably vary widely in size. Some units, for instance the units of the threshold level (in general: all units separating one level of general proficiency from another) will be quite big, perhaps requiring a year's study or more, whereas other units, for instance the specialised ones, may consist of merely some hundred vocabulary items.

2.10 It follows from 2.9 that the unit/credit system in language learning will be something quite different from the normal type of unit/credit systems, where each unit requires a roughly equal amount of study-time and where consequently each credit is an award for roughly equal outlays of energy. This latter type of unit/credit system is especially suitable for those learning-tasks that can be divided into steps, consequently for those subjects that can profitably be taught by programmed instruction.

2.11 Since it cannot be the object of the Council of Europe to impose a particular system of programmed instruction in foreign languages on its member States (cf. 2.4) there may be some doubt (cf. 2.9 and 2.10) as to the advisability of proceeding with the unit/credit scheme in the proposed form.

./.

3. Defining learning objectives

3.1 If learning is aimed at "the production of changes in behaviour potential" (1.2), the desired result of a learning process is to be defined in terms of "ability to behave in certain ways", in other words, it is to be defined in operational terms.

3.2 The behaviour potential referred to in 3.1 should also be defined with sufficient explicitness, i.e. the definition must not allow of different interpretations. Thus, with reference to a European unit/credit system, a Cypriot teacher should interpret the definitions of the various levels in the same way as his Norwegian colleague. As Robert Mager puts it in his Preparing Instructional Objectives (Belmont, California, 1962): "It (sc. an objective) is meaningful to the extent it conveys to others a picture (of what a successful learner will be like) identical to the picture the writer has in mind".

3.3 In order to be sufficiently explicit the definition of an educational objective should specify (1):

1. the content of that which has to be learned;

2. the behaviour which the successful learner will be expected to be able to exhibit (2);

3. the circumstances in which the behaviour will have to be exhibited (3);

4. the criterion of acceptable performance.

3.4 Lack of insight into the nature of certain abilities often precludes a definition which is sufficiently explicit according to the specification of 3.3. It is a considerably simpler task, for instance, to define the objective of a course in engineering than it is to describe explicitly the objective of a course in elocution. Nevertheless, even if a sufficiently explicit definition of an educational objective is not possible, it should at least be attempted to make such a definition as explicit as possible. This is all the more necessary if an objective is

---

(1) Adapted from C. M. Lindvall, Defining Educational Objectives, Pittsburgh, 1969, and R. F. Mager, Preparing Instructional Objectives, Belmont, Cal., 1962.

(2) Consequently terms such as "to understand", "to appreciate", etc. are not to be used in the definition unless it is specified exactly what the learner will be expected to do in order to demonstrate that he "understands" or "appreciates".

(3) E.g. whether note-taking or the use of instruments or reference works is permitted.

./.

an element in a system of objectives, e.g. the objective of a particular type of school within a national educational system, or the objective of a unit within a unit/credit system.

4. Defining language-learning objectives

4.1 Language is a means of communication. (We are not concerned here with such patterns of behaviour as interior monologue.) The aim of foreign language learning is first and foremost the ability to communicate verbally. Language learning objectives, therefore, are to be defined in terms of "adequate verbal behaviour in language communication situations".

4.2 It follows from 4.1 that a fully explicit definition of language learning objectives has to specify:

(a) the nature of the language communication situations in which verbal behaviour will have to be exhibited;

(b) what behaviour is to be considered "adequate" in each situation.

4.3 If by "situation" we understand "the sum of those extra-linguistic elements that are present in the minds of speakers or in external physical reality at the moment of communication and can be said to play a part in determining the form or the function of the linguistic elements" (F. François: Contexte et situation, from Linguistique. Guide alphabétique, Paris, Denoël, 1969, p.65, quoted by Richterich in CCC/EES (71) 55 and by Marchl and Richterich in CCC/EES (70) 99)), we must conclude with Marchl and Richterich (CCC/EES (70) 99, 2.5) that "the situations in which human beings use language" are "infinitely varied". On the other hand, this infinite variety need not preclude a classification of situations any more than the infinite variety of life-forms precludes a biological taxonomy.

4.4 A "situation" as defined by François is fully determined by a complex of variables. In its turn this situation fully determines the linguistic forms used in it.

4.5 The variables determining "situation" can be broadly divided into mental variables and physical variables.

4.6 Physical variables can be described and classified in terms of the broad categories set up by Marchl and Richterich (CCC/EES (70) 99, 4.3):

A. Protagonists

B. Actions

C. Means

D. Place

E. Time

F. Events

./.

4.7 Mental variables can be described only in terms of what Marchi and Richterich indicated as the "protagonists". They include the protagonists' knowledge, experience, insight, mood, intentions, hopes, likes and dislikes, etc. They also include their linguistic competence (in the Chomskyan sense). It is obvious that neither an exhaustive classification nor a neat description of these variables is within our means. If this were not the case every utterance produced by any speaker at any time would be fully predictable.

4.8 It follows from 4.7 that any classiciation of language communication situations will necessarily be incomplete and, up to a point, arbitrary. We must bear this in mind when attempting to specify "the nature of language communication situations in which verbal behaviour is exhibited" (4.2).

4.9 For our purposes we are entitled to select our specification criteria in accordance with the demands made by situations on the linguistic competence of the protagonists. Such a selection can be based on the assumption that "whatever language occurs in one situation will also occur in many others; there will be certain common-core elements of language which will have to be acquired no matter what the learner's purpose may be" (Wilkins, EES/Symposium 53.6). This means, in effect, that our specification of language communication situations need not go beyond a specification of those variables that make different demands on the language user's linguistic competence. For this purpose Trim's inventory (Appendix I, EES/Symposium 53.8) seems adequate.

4.10 The second requirement mentioned in 4.2 is that a difinition of language learning objectives should specify "what behaviour is to be considered adequate in each situation". A fully objective specification in terms of the learner's ability is not always possible. A communication situation implies the participation of more than one language user in the communication act, and whether the learner's behaviour in such a situation is adequate or not will, in many cases, depend on the other participant(s).

4.11 A learner's participation in communication situations may be divided into receptive roles (listening, reading) and productive roles (speaking, writing). The possibility of specifying adequacy depends largely on the particular role that is to be played.

4.12 Adequacy of behaviour in receptive roles may be specified objectively in various ways, depending on the learner's needs. If the learner desires to qualify as a shorthand typist his needs in the role of listener will obviously be complete identification and recognition of every word spoken. Only if the learner possesses this ability can his behaviour as a listener be considered adequate. If, on the other hand, the

./.

learner desires to take part in conversations his adequacy qua listener will be determined by the extent to which he succeeds in grasping the essence of what is said to him. In more demanding situations another requirement may be that he is capable of detecting overtones, innuendos, concealed emotions, etc. in a speaker's utterances.

4.13 In many cases a fully objective specification of adequacy of behaviour in productive roles is not possible. If we adopt as our basic criterion, as surely we must, whether the desired communication takes place, we find that adequacy depends heavily on the listener's or reader's powers of divination, on the latter's familiarity with the subject and with the speaker's or writer's linguistic and para-linguistic habits. Moreover, many everyday communication situations demand very little linguistic skill. A single mutilated word combined with effective gesture will often serve a speaker's purpose. The generalisation of such a speech-act, however, to similar situations and other circumstances is not assured since the linguistic competence underlying the speaker's act need not have sufficient generative power.

More reliable, if perhaps sometimes less realistic, indications of a speaker's competence may be obtained if we require him to communicate without gestures, as one would do by telephone, and in such a way that a complete stranger interprets his message correctly.

4.14 Another type of adequacy is that which is required to be accepted socially in a foreign-language community. One feature of this may be the ability to express oneself in a sub-standard dialect (migrant labourers!). Another feature may be a standard of correctness far beyond the needs of mere communication. Certain deficiencies in a foreign learner's speech or writing are easily accepted by native speakers whereas others constitute a social barrier, for instance if they happen to coincide with speech habits of socially disparaged groups of the community or if they are characteristic of infant speech. For the time being criteria for determining social adequacy will have to be derived from the majority verdicts of experienced language teachers while taking into account what pertinent results of socio-linguistic research have become available.

4.15 The ability to meet the needs of a communication situation need not be the sole criterion in evaluating a learner's adequacy of behaviour. Until he has reached full native-like command of the foreign language, the learner, qua learner, may be regarded as always being on his way towards this full command. This means that at each stage - and this would apply particularly to a unit/credit system - he has both a past history and a potential future history as a learner. Each stage he has reached should enable him to progress further towards a higher stage.

./.

4.15 It follows from 4.15 that adequacy should be specified not only in terms of communicative and social adequacy, but also in terms of pedagogical adequacy. For instance, if an intelligibly pronounced "Me want go sleep now" will undoubtedly constitute a perfectly adequate act of communication, it seems a doubtful basis for reaching a higher degree of proficiency unless Pidgin English is the aim. Unfortunately, rulings on pedagogical adequacy must necessarily be even more subjective and arbitrary than those on communicative and social adequacy. It is widely accepted nowadays that in acquiring mastery of a foreign language it is natural for a learner to pass through a succession of grammars each of which is more like the grammar of a native speaker than its predecessors. In this view errors occur naturally as integral elements in the learning process. They are to be interpreted as signs that the learner is testing hypotheses about the grammar of the target language, which he may eventually reject if they prove to be inadequate. Some of these errors will be based on hypotheses that will only need minor modifications, others may be interpreted as signs that the learner is entirely on the wrong track and will have to revise his hypotheses drastically. However, our insight into natural foreign language learning processes is so slight that most of our notions as to what errors are occasioned by a normal growth-process and what errors are the results of sickly malformations are, at the least, tentative ones. For the present, it would seem pedagogical adequacy will have to remain a subjective concept based on majority verdicts of experienced language teachers who know what errors are easily remedied and what errors are highly resistant to therapeutic treatment.

5. Defining a threshold level

5.1 It follows from Chapter 4, especially from the discussion of "adequacy" (4.10 - 4.16) that there is no such thing as one particular minimum level, basic level or threshold level in foreign language competence. A tourist who finds himself in a foreign country may get along quite happily on a vocabulary of less than a hundred words, mostly concrete nouns and perhaps a few action-verbs and state-adjectives, whereas a migrant labourer may need a much larger vocabulary and a greater command of grammatical structure if he is to survive - linguistically speaking - in his occupational environment. Again, a grandfather who wishes to be able to read the letters sent to him by his fond relatives, second generation emigrants to a foreing language community, will find that his minimum level of competence will have to be a fairly high one. It will be even higher for those whose minimum requirement is the ability to make some sense of articles in popular newspapers and the more general types of radio-programmes.

./.

5.2 We conclude from 5.1 that minimum language needs depend so much on the individual needs of various classes of learners and may vary so widely that decisions on the height of the threshold level will have to be based on other grounds than "minimum language needs". The only alternative would seem to be the setting up of a threshold level at least as high as that required for the certificates of the German Volkshochschulverband. Of this level it may perhaps be claimed that it satisfies the minimum needs of the majority of foreign language learners by providing them with, among other things, a vocabulary of some 2000 words based on analyses of all kinds of communication situations. This alternative, however, does not seem to be a realistic one. For one thing, it would set the level too high for several classes of learners, especially those with little schooling in their native language. In addition, it would require a few years of study, which would hardly be encouraging to those about to embark upon a foreign language course for beginners.

5.3 If it is agreed that the threshold level will have to be considerably below that which will satisfy the minimum language needs of the majority of learners in the majority of everyday situations, in short below that of the Volkshochschulzertifikat, a decision on the height of the level may be made by determining a level of proficiency sufficiently far removed from both zero-level and that of the Volkshochschulzertifikat to be easily recognisable as clearly distinct from both. Also, in order to encourage would-be beginners, it should be attainable in a relatively short period of time.

5.4 On the basis of 5.3 it is proposed that the threshold level should be set up, in terms of vocabulary content, somewhere near the 500-word mark. The second level of general proficiency would then correspond to that of the Volkshochschulverband certificates (1500 - 2000 words).

5.5 In accordance with the procedure for defining educational objectives described in 3.3 of this paper a definition of the threshold level should begin with a specification of "the content of that which has to be learned".

5.6 For each of the four skills linguistic ability includes at least the ability to use words and to apply grammatical rules. In addition, each separate skill makes further demands on the language user's ability, such as:

speaking: phonic representation;

listening: phonic interpretation;

writing: orthographic representation;

reading: orthographic interpretation.

./.

5.7 Since the unit/credit system is to be a framework which can accommodate all (at least all European) languages, a specification of the lexical and syntactic content of the threshold level will, in principle, have to be non-language-specific. It will be a statement to the effect that at threshold level the learner will have the ability to express and/or to interpret particular concepts in the foreign language.

5.8 Concepts can be expressed by means of lexical items and/or grammatically. Moreover, concepts expressed lexically in one language may be expressed by syntactic means in another language. In addition, a language may have both lexical representations and grammatical ones of certain concepts. A case in point is the concept "uncertainty" which in English may be expressed lexically by means of the adverb perhaps and grammatically by means of the model may.

5.9 It follows from 5.8 that a non-language-specific list of concepts cannot distinguish a lexical and a grammatical component as sharply as we might wish. Nevertheless, all European languages agree to a large extent in their choice of either lexical means or grammatical means to express concepts. Thus the concepts book, to walk and love are expressed lexically in all European languages, and, on the other hand, all these languages possess grammatical means to express the contrasts past/present and singular/plural.

5.10 It is proposed that the list of items to be mastered at threshold level will have two non-language-specific parts. The first, and largest, part will be an inventory of concepts that a successful learner will be expected to handle adequately in the target language, whether by lexical or grammatical means. The second part will be a list of basic grammatical features shared by all European languages. The two parts together will constitute a non-language-specific master-list that can be translated into any European language and that covers most of the concepts the learner will be expected to have mastered at threshold level. It does not cover them all. For each language individually a supplement will have to be added to the list. Each language, or group of languages, is the vehicle of a particular culture marked by a prevalence of certain culture-specific concepts. Those lexical items which are used to express particularly prevalent concepts will have to be added for each language individually to the non-language-specific master-list, if, at least, they are prevalent enough to be included in a very limited basic vocabulary. Similarly, additions may have to be made for each language separately to the grammatical component of the master-list. In this case the necessity does not arise, one would assume, out of culture-specific features but out of basic syntactic characteristics of individual languages. Individual languages, or groups of languages may possess syntactic features which are basic in these languages and only marginal, or perhaps even absent, in others. Thus for instance the contrast perfective/imperfective in the Russian verb-system and the contrast progressive/non-progressive in English. These contrasts are basic in the sense that even a minimally adequate level of linguistic skill may require the ability to handle them.

./.

5.11 In accordance with 4.1 - 4.2 of this paper an inventory of concepts should be derived from an analysis of language used in selected types of communication situations. For our purposes a much more economical procedure seems to be justified. Several teams of specialists have already produced basic vocabularies for various languages. Although their methods, and their selection-criteria, may have differed considerably, their aim has always been the composition of word-lists that would meet the most basic language needs of the majority of learners in the majority of everyday situations. If, when collating a number of these basic word-lists, we find - as we certainly will - that, in spite of different methods, there is a considerable number of concepts which are to be found in all or most of the lists, we may assume that these concepts are truly basic concepts, whatever the language studied and whatever the background of the learners. These concepts would qualify for a place in our master-list. The final step will be to expand, or, more probably, to reduce their number to ca. 500 (cf. 5.4).

5.12 To establish the syntactic content of the threshold level a procedure similar to that described in 5.11 may be followed. Basic structure lists are less generally available than basic vocabulary lists, so in this case a collation would have to be made of those basic structure lists that are available for various European languages and of a number of elementary course-books. This collation will yield a number of common syntactic features which would qualify for inclusion in our master-list. In view of the wide variety of surface realisations of similar deep structure features in different languages it seems likely that for each language a relatively large language-specific list of syntactic features will have to be added. Such a supplementary list can be arrived at by collating a number of widely-used and modern elementary course-books for each language individually and extracting those syntactic features which are represented in all or most of them. This procedure will be exemplified for one language, viz. English, in a later paper.

5.13 The procedures described in 5.11 - 5.12 allow to bypass the problems involved in the description and selection of situations. Nevertheless we do obtain lists that are ultimately derived from language used in situations. Our sources, basic vocabulary lists such as the Mindestwortschätze of the Volkshochschulverband, are themselves based on such criteria as frequency and usefulness in everyday situations. Accepting the judgement of the composers of these lists seems to be fully justified for those concepts that a number of different teams appear to agree on. It should be emphasised that this procedure is valid only for the lower levels of language teaching/learning. The higher we go the less agreement there will be found among different word-lists and the more imperative it becomes to undertake fresh research on the basis of new observations of language in use.

./.

5.14 The vocabulary and syntax lists arrived at in the way indicated in 5.11 - 5.12 define the linguistic content of the threshold level to a large extent. Because they represent a basic competence level there seems to be no need to distinguish - with respect to these lists - at this level between the four skills. There may be particular instances where it might be claimed that in language A concept p is more useful in speaking than concept q and that the inverse is the case in writing, but the amount of research that would be needed to establish this would be disproportionate to the slender gains that might result from it.

5.15 In order to be operational a definition of the learner's ability at threshold level will have to specify what he will be expected to do with the vocabulary and syntax at his disposal. This specification will have to be made for each of the four skills separately.

5.16 The form such a specification may take will be exemplified here for one skill: listening (or rather: oral comprehension)

5.17 For threshold level, as indeed for many higher levels, we may define oral comprehension as the ability to grasp the essence of an utterance or of a series of utterances.

5.18 At threshold level the utterances that are to be understood will contain no other lexical elements than the ones specified in the basic vocabulary list, or the utterances will also contain other lexical items as long as it is not necessary to understand these items in order to grasp the essence of the communication.

5.19 The utterances will contain no other syntactic elements than the ones specified in the basic syntax list and will be no longer than x syllables each. The latter restriction is a very practical and easily applicable restraint on syntactic complexity. We have little insight into the parameters of syntactic complexity as factors of communicative difficulty, so we seem to have no other readily available alternatives. It is certainly not enough to stipulate that no other than certain (simple) rules may be involved in the generation of the utterances because of the recurrent nature of syntactic rules. If a "simple" rule operates again and again this may result in a very "difficult" sentence in spite of its fundamental syntactic simplicity.

5.20 The utterances will be spoken with a careful standard accent, at normal or below-normal speech-rate (to be further specified as "more than x centiseconds per syllable and less than y centiseconds per syllable").

5.21 The utterances will be presented in such a way that the acoustic signal reaches the listner without any perceptible distortion.

./.

5.22 The learner will be given one or two or more opportunities to listen to the utterance(s).

5.23 The learner will or will not be allowed to make notes while listening.

5.24 The learner will be considered to have grasped the essence of an utterance, or of a series of utterances, if he performs certain specifiable acts, e.g. following an instruction given in the utterances, or identifying the sentence that correctly represents it in a series of three or four potential representations (multiple-choice), or etc.

5.25 In accordance with 3.3 of this paper it will finally have to be specified what proportion of the acts to be performed by the listener must be "correct" for his behaviour to be considered adequate.

5.26 The above suggestions for defining oral comprehension indicate that an operational definition of an educational objective determines the form of the tests or examinations by means of which the learner's achievement is to be evaluated. The actual tests or examinations are to be regarded as samples of the type of test or examination dictated by the educational objective. This close relationship between objectives and tests or examinations is not surprising since objectives specify what a learner is supposed to be able to do and tests or examinations actually require him to do this.

6. Conclusion

6.1 The analysis of problems involved in defining a threshold level in foreign language learning leads to a number of conclusions with respect to the unit/credit scheme in general and the determination of levels in particular.

6.2 Language learning does not lend itself as readily as many other learning processes to a neat division into units of roughly equal size (cf. 2.11 of this paper).

6.3 A more "natural" way to divide language learning into separate parts would be a distinction of various levels and types of linguistic ability.

6.4 A basis for establishing levels is the ability to behave adequately in particular types of verbal communication situations.

6.5 The notion "adequacy" is a complex one and decisions as to what behaviour is to be considered adequate must necessarily rest on a weighting of various types of adequacy which is to a certain extent arbitrary.

./.

6.6 There is a certain amount of agreement among experts that the level of linguistic ability which allows the majority of learners to exhibit a kind of behaviour which in the majority of communication situations might be called "adequate" by most standards requires, among other things, a vocabulary of some 1500-2000 items.

6.7 The determination of the height of a threshold level is to a large extent arbitrary. For pedagogical reasons a level requiring, among other things, a vocabulary of some 500 words seems to be recommendable.

6.8 In defining a threshold level in operational terms it is possible to follow a procedure which will warrant early results.

6.9 The results obtained by following the suggested procedure will have a high chance of being found acceptable by educational authorities all over Europe since, in fact, they will be based on the most generally held opinions as to what linguistic elements are of basic importance.

6.10 A definition of the threshold level and a few other levels as worthwhile language learning objectives will probably be the most effective first step towards a European language learning system.

6.11 A second internationally acceptable level will be one similar to the level of the German Volkshochschulzertifikat. This certificate is actually recognised in several European countries and its level is comparatively well defined.

6.12 A European language learning system with a high acceptability potential can be developed more economically by drawing upon available resources than by making a completely new start.

6.13 The following general procedure should allow an early introduction of a European language learning system:

1. Definition of a threshold level in the way suggested in this paper.

2. Definition of a second level of general competence based, as much as possible, on some existing and widely recognised diplomas and certificates.

3. Development of models of standardised tests for each defined level.

4. Definition of further general levels and of specialised types of linguistic ability based on:

(a) investigation into foreign language needs of adult learners;

(b) existing and widely recognised diplomas and certificates. (1)

5. Establishment of European diplomas and certificates or recognition of existing national diplomas and certificates awarded with the approval of European experts. If so desired, credits may be granted with each diploma or certificate.

---

(1) E.g. the forthcoming Volkshochschulzertifikat "Englisch Wirtschaft", the result of English-German cooperation.